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ABSTRACT

Gender effects upon perceptions of grandparenting experience were examined in a study involving 115 grandfathers and 186 grandmothers who represented a wide range of incomes and educational and occupational backgrounds. Particularly studied were differences in Caucasian grandparents' enjoyment of relationships with grandchildren, beliefs about appropriate levels of involvement in grandchildren's care and discipline, obligations to help grandchildren, and freedom to offer child rearing advice to parents. Also examined were beliefs about the personal significance of relationships with grandchildren that were associated with grandparent gender, grandchild gender, and maternal and paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent. Subjects participated in a structured interview which concerned their relationship with one of their grandchildren. Only one grandparent of each grandchild was interviewed. Findings identified differences between grandmothers' and grandfathers' views, namely, that grandmothers expressed greater grandparenting satisfaction than did grandfathers, and that grandfathers stressed the importance of family extension through grandchildren and the pleasures of indulging grandchildren more than did grandmothers. The hypothesis that grandmothers with granddaughters and grandfathers with grandsons would express the highest levels of grandparenting satisfaction, perceived grandparenting responsibilities, and grandparenting meaning was not supported. (RH)

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Gender and Perceptions of Grandparenthood

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Abstract

The present study examined differences in grandparenting satisfaction, perceived grandparenting responsibilities, and grandparenthood meaning that were associated with gender and with maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent. Participants were 115 grandfathers and 186 grandmothers aged 43 to 86; the sample represented a wide range of incomes and educational and occupational backgrounds. Each grandparent participated in a structured interview concerning their relationship with one grandchild. Grandmothers expressed greater grandparenting satisfaction than did grandfathers; grandfathers stressed the importance of family extension through grandchildren and the pleasures of indulging grandchildren to a greater extent than did grandmothers.

Gender and Perceptions of Grandparenthood

Grandparenthood is increasingly recognized as a normative family experience offering social and psychological benefits to grandparent and grandchild (e.g., Bengtson & Robertson, 1985; Kivnick, 1982a, b; 1985). Grandparents' involvement with grandchildren is likely to reflect their satisfaction with these relationships, their responsibilities in grandchildren's upbringing, and the personal meaning of relationships with grandchildren. As grandparenthood now spans most of middle and later adulthood, understanding the experience--and individual differences in the experience--could enhance general understanding of well-being in this period of life.

In the present study, gender effects upon perceptions of grandparenting experience were examined. Two research questions were addressed. First, are there differences in perceptions of grandparenthood that are associated with grandparent gender, with grandchild gender, or with maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent? Second, are there additive or interactive effects of grandparent gender, grandchild gender, and maternal/paternal lineage upon perceptions of grandparenting? Identifying gender influences upon relationships with grandchildren could clarify the life-span consequences of gender differences in roles and personality that are apparent earlier in the life course.

At least three theories of adult development form a context for grandparenthood research. Disengagement theory posits that life satisfaction in old age is maximized through mutual withdrawal by the older individual and society (Cumming & Henry, 1961). However, this process does not extend to family relationships, which may become more important as the older person

relinquishes other sources of involvement; grandparenthood may thus increase in significance with aging (Troll et al., 1979). Activity theory includes the assumption that life satisfaction in old age is maximized by maintaining earlier levels of social involvement (e.g., Lemon et al., 1972); here, family bonds, including those with grandchildren, are one possible means of involvement.

Finally, Erikson (1963) proposed that older individuals benefit from generative ties to younger people. Recent formulations of this theory include discussions of ways in which grandparent-grandchild relationships influence development throughout the life-span (Kivnick, 1982a, b; 1985). Clearly, theorists agree that grandparenting is a significant context for personal and social development, although they disagree about the source and nature of this significance.

Gender can potentially affect perceptions of grandparenting experience through at least three routes: grandparents' gender, grandchildren's gender, and maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent all may influence these perceptions. Scholars have identified correlates of grandparent gender which include caretaking involvement, influence patterns, and the personal meaning of grandparenthood. Early research showed that grandmothers took care of grandchildren more often than did grandfathers (Albrecht, 1954; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964). In more recent survey research, grandfathers expressed greater responsibility for offering childrearing advice than did grandmothers; grandmothers expressed greater satisfaction with grandparenting, and less responsibility for grandchildren's care, than did grandfathers (Thomas, 1986a). For the grandparents in that

study, perceived responsibilities for helping grandchildren and taking care of grandchildren, together with age and gender of the grandparent and age of the oldest grandchild, were significant predictors of grandparenting satisfaction (Thomas, 1986b). On the basis of a study of three-generation families, Hagestad (1985) reported that grandfathers attempted to influence young adult grandchildren only in instrumental matters (e.g., jobs, finances), whereas grandmothers attempted to influence grandchildren's interpersonal and instrumental activities.

In a classic study that included examinations of grandparenthood meaning, Neugarten & Weinstein (1964) noted that grandmothers often found a sense of biological renewal in grandparenting; however, grandfathers most often viewed grandparenting as an opportunity for emotional fulfillment. More recently, Kivnick (1982a, b; 1985) found that grandparenthood meaning had distinct compensatory relationships to mental health for men and for women. In research based upon Erikson's theory of development, Kivnick identified associations between grandparenthood meaning and life satisfaction and morale. For grandmothers, the extent to which grandparenthood became a central component of life and permitted reinvolvement with the past increased as deprivations of later life (e.g., retirement, bereavement) increased. These functions of grandparenthood meaning compensated for deprivations in their relation to life satisfaction and morale. For grandfathers, emphasis upon indulgence and a sense of immortality through grandparenting increased as deprivations decreased; these components of grandparenthood meaning were positively related to life satisfaction and morale.

Scholars have given less attention ways in which grandchildren's gender might influence perceptions of grandparenting experience. However, grandmothers and grandfathers in recent qualitative research described relationships with grandsons and granddaughters differently. These grandparents conformed to traditional views of male and female roles in their behavior toward grandchildren (Thomas, 1982). In Hagestad's (1985) study of grandparents in three-generation families, grandparents' efforts to influence grandchildren were most pronounced within same-sex grandparent-grandchild dyads.

Finally, the gender of the parental "link" between grandparent and grandchild may have an impact upon perceptions of grandparenthood. Young adult grandchildren have reported that their parents' attitudes and behavior toward grandparents affected their own relationships with grandparents (Gilford & Black, 1972; Robertson, 1976). Furthermore, grandchildren evidence closer bonds to maternal grandparents, particularly the maternal grandmother, than to paternal grandparents (e.g., Kahana & Kahana, 1970); this finding may reflect women's kin-keeping functions (Troll et al., 1979).

Earlier work has, then, documented ways in which views of grandparenting experience are associated with the grandparent's gender, differences between relationships with grandsons and granddaughters, and ways in which grandparenting is affected by bonds with the parental generation. However, these conclusions have been based upon separate lines of research. More integrative work, including consideration of possible additive or interactive influences of grandparent gender, grandchild gender, and maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent, is needed. The findings of such an

approach could contribute to a comprehensive theory of the developmental function of grandparenthood, and identify gender differences in these functions. The findings could also clarify life-span consequences of the sex-role socialization of contemporary grandparents, parents, and grandchildren.

The present study examined differences in grandparenting satisfaction (personal enjoyment of relationships with grandchildren), perceived grandparenting responsibilities (beliefs about appropriate levels of involvement in grandchildren's care and discipline, obligations to help grandchildren, and freedom to offer childrearing advice to parents), and grandparenthood meaning (personal significance of relationships with grandchildren) that were associated with grandparent gender, grandchild gender, and maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent. In structured interviews, grandparents described their relationship with one of their grandchildren.

Previous research has most often documented associations between grandparents' gender and perceptions of grandparenting. In the present study, it was hypothesized that grandmothers and grandfathers would differ in grandparenting satisfaction, perceived grandparenting responsibilities, and grandparenthood meaning. Discussions of women as kin-keepers suggested the hypothesis that maternal grandparents would express greater satisfaction with the relationships and higher levels of perceived responsibilities than would paternal grandparents. Hagestad's (1985) finding that influence patterns were most pronounced within same-sex grandparent-grandchild dyads suggested the further hypothesis that grandmothers with granddaughters, and grandfathers with grandsons, would express the highest levels of grandparenting

satisfaction, perceived grandparenting responsibilities, and grandparenthood meaning. Thus, the present study was an effort to identify more complex patterns of gender influences upon relationships with grandchildren, as well as to confirm previously identified differences among grandparents' perceptions.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 115 grandfathers and 186 grandmothers aged 43 to 86; one member of married grandparent couples participated. All were volunteers recruited through newspaper articles describing the research, requests made at meetings of church and civic organizations, and chain sampling. Each grandparent received a single payment of $25.00 for their participation.

Each grandparent described their experiences with one "target" grandchild (see Procedures section). Approximately half of the target grandchildren (52.8%) were grandsons, and nearly half of the participants (42.5%) were paternal grandparents of their target grandchild. There were 64 grandfathers with grandsons, and 90 grandmothers with granddaughters. Table 1 summarizes grandparents' demographic background.

Insert Table 1 about here

All participants were noninstitutionalized residents of southeastern Wisconsin. All were Caucasian, none were stepgrandparents of their target grandchild, and none shared a household with grandchildren. Great-grandparents were excluded from the sample. The transition to great-grandparenthood may affect perceptions of grandparenting in significant but as yet

unknown ways (Troll et al., 1979); although these effects are an important research topic, their examination was beyond the scope of the present study.

Grandmothers were significantly younger than grandfathers, t (298) = 4.14, $p < .0001$ (Mean ages: grandmothers = 59.5, grandfathers = 63.2); number of grandchildren and age of the target grandchild did not differ significantly for grandmothers and grandfathers, p's > .05. Maternal and paternal grandparents did not differ significantly in age, number of grandchildren, or age of the target grandchild p's > .05; similarly, grandparents with grandsons and those with granddaughters did not differ significantly in age, number of grandchildren, or age of the target grandchild, p's > .05. Geographic proximity of the target grandchild was not significantly associated with grandparent gender, with target grandchild gender, or with maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent, p's > .05.

Most (81%) grandparents were married (see Table 1). Grandmothers were more likely to be widowed or divorced than were grandfathers, chi-square (2) = 20.21, $p < .00001$. The sample represented a wide range of occupations or former occupations, income, and educational background (see Table 1). Grandmothers were more likely than grandfathers to be employed part-time or not to be working outside of the home than were grandfathers, chi-square (3) = 10.34, $p < .02$; grandmothers who were employed at the time of the interview were more likely than grandfathers to be working in service or clerical positions, and less likely to be working in blue-collar positions, chi-square (5) = 46.20, $p < .00001$. Finally, grandmothers were less likely than grandfathers to have continued their education beyond the high school level,

chi-square (8) = 29.28, $p < .0003$. Grandmothers and grandfathers did not differ, however, in annual household income, $p > .05$.

Target grandchild gender and maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent were not significantly associated with grandparents' marital status, occupational or educational background, or income, p's $> .05$

Procedures

Each grandparent participated in a structured interview concerning their relationship with a target grandchild; The author or an undergraduate research assistant conducted all interviews; interviews lasted one to one and a half hours. For each grandparent, the target grandchild was the oldest grandchild in the two-parent household geographically closest to the grandparent. Since grandparents were asked about their relationship with one grandchild, it was possible to compare responses for maternal and paternal relationships, and for relationships with grandsons and granddaughters. Earlier research, in which data described grandparenthood in general, had precluded these comparisons.

Interview topics included frequency of contact with the target grandchild, demographic background, and perceptions of the relationship with the target grandchild. Likert scales assessed perceptions of 10 aspects of the relationship: (1) satisfaction (15 items, Cronbach's alpha = .79), (2) perceived caretaking responsibility (3 items, Cronbach's alpha = .55), (3) perceived discipline responsibility (16 items, Cronbach's alpha = .84), (4) perceived helping responsibility (4 items, Cronbach's alpha = .70), (5) perceived responsibility for offering childrearing advice (13 items, Cronbach's alpha = .90), (6) centrality of relationship in grandparent's life (15 items, Cronbach's alpha =.90), (7) sharing wisdom with grandchild (14

items, Cronbach's alpha = .83), (8) indulging grandchild (4 items, Cronbach's alpha = .69), (9) reexperiencing the past through the relationship (9 items, Cronbach's alpha = .82), and (10) importance of family extension through the grandchild (14 items, Cronbach's alpha = .86).

The ten Likert scales were modifications of measures used in previous research on grandparenthood (Kivnick, 1982a, b; 1985; Thomas, 1986a, b)1. All scale items presented statements describing the relationship with the target grandchild, or grandparenthood in general. Grandparents used a 7-point response scale (very strongly agree to very strongly disagree) to report the extent to which each statement corresponded to their experience; all scales included both positively- and negatively-worded items. Numerical values corresponding to scale items were added to produce scale scores.

Analysis

Two 2 (grandparent gender) by 2 (grandchild gender) by 2 (maternal/paternal lineage) multivariate analyses of variance were performed. Cell sizes ranged from 20 to 56; five of the ten perceptions of grandparenting scale scores were dependent variables in each analysis. Means for all dependent variables appear in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

In the first analysis, the scale scores for satisfaction, perceived caretaking responsibility, perceived discipline responsibility, perceived helping responsibility, and perceived responsibility for offering childrearing advice were dependent variables. There were no significant interaction

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1Copies of the Likert scales are available upon request from the author.

effects, p's < .21, or significant main effects for grandchild gender or maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent, p's < .08. There was a significant main effect for grandparent gender, multivariate F (5, 288) = 2.87, Wilk's lambda = .953, p < .015. Grandmothers expressed greater grandparenting satisfaction than did grandfathers, F (1, 292) = 7.68, p < .006 (Means: grandmothers = 78.51, s.d. = 10.49; grandfathers = 74.52, s.d. = 10.66).

In the second analysis, the scale scores for centrality of the relationship, sharing wisdom with the grandchild, indulging the grandchild, reexperiencing the past through the relationship, and the importance of family extension through the grandchild were dependent variables. There were no significant interaction effects, p's < .16, or significant main effects for grandchild gender or maternal/paternal lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent, p's < .31. There was a significant main effect for grandparent gender, multivariate F (5, 288) = 4.94, Wilk's lambda = .921, p < .0001. Grandfathers stressed the importance of family extension through grandchildren, F (1, 292) = 4.62, p < .03 (Means: grandmothers = 60.11, s.d. = 11.05; grandfather = 62.81, s.d. = 9.90), and the pleasures of indulging grandchildren, F (1, 292) = 4.58, p < 03 (Means: grandmothers = 16.70, s.d. = 2.81; grandfathers = 17.30, s.d. = 2.69), to a greater extent than did grandmothers.

DISCUSSION

The present study has identified differences between grandmothers' and grandfathers' views of their relationships with a grandchild. Grandmothers reported greater satisfaction with these relationships than did grandfathers,

whereas grandfathers placed greater stress upon generational extension of the family and upon indulging grandchildren than did grandmothers. Grandmothers and grandfathers did not differ in levels of perceived responsibilities toward their target grandchild. Nor did they differ in the extent to which they stressed the centrality of the relationship in their lives, in the extent to which the relationship permitted reinvolvement with their past, or in the extent to they valued sharing wisdom with the grandchild.

Thus, the hypothesis that grandmothers and grandfathers would differ in their perceptions of the relationship with the target grandchild was only partially supported. In particular, earlier findings that grandfathers expressed greater responsibility for offering childrearing advice and for taking care of grandchildren (Thomas, 1986a) were not confirmed. Failure of the present study to support this hypothesis may reflect measurement differences between the two studies. In the present study, grandparents were interviewed about their relationship with one specific grandchild; in the earlier study, grandparents were asked about their views of grandparenthood in general. Grandfathers may most readily express these types of responsibilities when questioned on a relatively abstract, general level rather than when questions are posed in the context of a more specific, concrete relationship. It is also possible that grandfathers most readily express these types of responsibilities in relationships with relatively young grandchildren. Questions specifically concerning an oldest grandchild (as the target grandchild) in this study, then, may not fully reflect grandfathers' feelings of responsibilities for care and advising toward grandchildren.

The hypothesis that maternal grandparents would report greater satisfaction with the relationships and express higher levels of responsibilities toward the grandchildren was not supported. The criteria for selection of the target grandchild--particularly age and geographic proximity of the grandchild relative to other grandchildren--may be factors which more strongly influence enjoyment and obligation in the relationship than does lineage of grandparent-grandchild descent.

The hypothesis that grandmothers with granddaughters, and grandfathers with grandsons, would express the highest levels of grandparenting satisfaction, perceived grandparenting responsibilities, and grandparenthood meaning was not supported. This hypothesis was based primarily upon Hagestad's (1985) study of influence between grandparents and young adult grandchildren in three-generation families. Failure to support this hypothesis may reflect sample or methodological differences between the two studies.

For the most part, the grandparents in the present study were describing relationships with much younger grandchildren than had the grandparents in Hagestad's three-generation study. It is possible that the significance of same-sex versus cross-sex grandparent-grandchild dyads emerges when grandchildren reach adolescence or adulthood, and begin to assume more mature social roles. It is also possible that none of the measures of the relationship with the target grandchild in the present study corresponded to grandparents' efforts to influence grandchildren, as assessed in Hagestad's research.

The gender differences in grandparenthood meaning and grandparenting satisfaction that were identified may reflect these men's and women's

individual growth, and the cultural context of the research. Grandfathers' stress upon indulging grandchildren may reflect the increases in men's nurturance and expressivity during middle and later adulthood proposed by scholars of adult personality development (e.g., Gutmann, 1977): one way in which an older man might express these qualities is by indulging grandchildren. Grandfathers' endorsement of family extension through grandchildren may reflect cultural traditions of patrilineal descent. For grandfathers, then, relationships with grandchildren may be developmentally, as well as culturally, significant.

Even if relationships with grandchildren are opportunities for growth, these bonds are ones in which grandfathers experience less satisfaction than do grandmothers. Assuming that these grandmothers had been their own children's primary caregivers, one can also assume that they were more familiar than grandfathers with intimate adult-child family relationships. For men, grandparenting might be developmentally adaptive, but might also represent uncomfortable change in experience. Conversely, grandmothers' higher satisfaction scores could reveal continuity of earlier and current family experiences. For contemporary middle-aged and older women, childrearing has been a culturally-encouraged area of competence throughout the life course; exercising these familiar functions might bring satisfaction as opportunities draw upon this expertise.

Subsequent research should identify relationships between grandparenthood experiences and grandparents' mental health, as well as gender and lineage variation in these associations. The findings reported here suggest that relationships with grandchildren may have particular developmental benefits

for both grandfathers and grandmothers. Similarly, Kivnick's (1982a, b; 1985) recent research reveals distinct compensatory functions of grandparenthood meaning for women and men. Identifying additional associations between perceptions of grandparenthood and psychological well-being--and gender differences in these associations--would further clarify the clinical and developmental significance of relationships with grandchildren.

In addition, the nature of the parental "link" between grandparent and grandchild should be examined in greater detail. The affective quality, if not the lineage, of the relationship with the parental generation may influence relationships with grandchildren, and could moderate any mental health benefits that grandparenthood provides. Finally, findings of the present study could be usefully extended through research with more diverse samples of grandparents; examinations of racial and ethnic variation in the functions of grandparenthood would be especially valuable. With these data, scholars would be better prepared to offer insight into the nature and importance of grandparenthood to researchers, to practitioners, and to grandparents and their families.

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2Requests for reprints should be addressed to the author, Division of Behavioral Sciences, Box 2000, University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Kenosha, WI 53141-2000.

Table 1

Grandparent Demographic Characteristics

Age	60.91 (7.67)
Target Grandchild Age	7.76 (5.10)
Number of Grandchildren	4.64 (3.38)
Marital Status	
Married	81%
Widowed	14%
Divorced	5%
Employment Status2	
Full-time	25%
Part-time	19%
Not Employed	28%
Retired	40%
Occupation of Employed Grandparents	
White Collar/Professional	13%
Clerical	13%
Blue Collar	6%
Service	9%
Agricultural	.3%
Other	1.3%

2Percentages do not sum to 100 as some retired grandparents were employed part-time.

Highest Level of Education Completed	
Less Than High School Degree	17%
High School Degree	44%
Some College or Post-Secondary Schooling	25%
College Degree	9%
Graduate Degree	5%
Annual Household Income	
Less than $20,000	29%
$20,001 to $40,000	46%
More than $40,001	23%
Geographic Proximity of Target Grandchild's Family	
Within 15 Min Drive	66%
Within 15-30 Min Drive	8%
Within 30-60 Min Drive	5%
Within 1-2 Hr Drive	8%
Farther than 2 Hr Drive	14%

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

Table 2

Perceptions of Grandparenting Scale Scores

	GRANDMOTHERS				GRANDFATHERS			
	Maternal		Paternal		Maternal		Paternal	
SCALE	Grandson n = 52	Granddaughter n = 56	Grandson n = 43	Granddaughter n = 34	Grandson n = 34	Granddaughter n = 31	Grandson n = 30	Granddaughter n = 20
Satisfactiona	79.90 (9.70)	79.07 (11.21)	74.93 (10.62)	79.77 (9.77)	73.47 (9.91)	74.68 (10.73)	72.80 (11.16)	78.65 (10.69)
Discipline Responsibility	67.90 (9.93)	63.41 (12.03)	63.70 (8.73)	65.71 (11.92)	65.91 (11.29)	63.19 (10.39)	64.97 (10.72)	64.40 (7.96)
Caretaking Responsibility	9.96 (2.69)	10.18 (2.18)	9.88 (2.32)	9.53 (2.31)	9.88 (2.58)	10.52 (2.10)	9.43 (1.70)	10.60 (3.07)
Advising Responsibility	54.96 (8.40)	54.18 (9.62)	50.05 (8.79)	51.65 (10.78)	53.74 (10.49)	55.36 (9.24)	53.67 (7.89)	55.20 (8.84)
Helping Responsibility	21.65 (2.86)	20.77 (3.34)	20.47 (3.28)	20.91 (3.09)	20.85 (2.77)	20.74 (4.22)	19.93 (3.50)	21.70 (3.40)
Centrality of Relationship	67.21 (10.20)	63.57 (11.85)	63.77 (12.36)	65.62 (11.60)	64.06 (10.21)	63.61 (10.93)	63.17 (9.30)	66.95 (11.39)
Sharing Wisdom	65.02 (10.81)	61.64 (11.57)	63.49 (8.76)	64.68 (8.76)	63.94 (6.74)	61.29 (9.50)	61.97 (8.72)	63.15 (12.49)
Indulging Grandchilda	16.56 (3.08)	16.63 (2.67)	16.98 (3.09)	16.65 (2.27)	16.88 (2.43)	17.32 (2.86)	16.87 (1.93)	18.60 (3.50)
Reexperience The Past	33.79 (8.02)	29.36 (7.47)	31.77 (8.94)	33.82 (7.90)	33.00 (7.44)	32.97 (8.35)	32.67 (8.89)	33.25 (9.48)
Extension of Familya	61.08 (11.30)	57.41 (10.56)	60.72 (12.27)	62.09 (9.46)	63.65 (9.63)	61.00 (8.45)	61.47 (10.52)	66.20 (11.11)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.